



Partnering with Traffic Safety Specialists: Tips for Health Care Professionals

Why Get Involved in Highway Safety?

Health care professionals possess a unique perspective about injuries sustained in motor vehicle-related crashes. When trauma patients arrive in an emergency department, the damage has already been done and care is intensely focused on this post-event phase. The realization that there could be significant temporary or potentially lifelong consequences from injury is often appreciated first by those who provide acute care. Those persons who work in rehabilitation settings know what a long struggle it can be for a severely injured person to return to being functional.

Health care providers of all types often recognize the risk factors that were present prior to the injury and they witness the impact of injury for the individual, family, and friends. They have the advantage of a “teachable moment” in either the emergency department or during routine health care visits to educate their patients about the prevention of motor vehicle-related injuries.

Since health care professionals typically provide care for one person at a time, they may not realize the overall frequency of injury occurring in the population they serve. Even those who work in a trauma facility where motor vehicle crash victims are seen first-hand, may not realize the extent of the injury problem in the patient population or the community at large. When health care professionals study the entire motor vehicle injury problem beyond what they see on an individual patient level, they often realize that this type of injury represents too large a proportion of the patient population. Fortunately, health care providers are in a unique position to work towards the prevention of motor vehicle injuries. This requires health care professionals to shift from a treatment orientation to a prevention orientation. The shift starts with viewing injuries as predictable and preventable — in other words, that injuries are not “accidents.”

Who is Already Involved in Traffic Safety and What Are the Benefits of Working Together?

A multi-disciplinary network of individuals and groups which is working to prevent motor vehicle injuries exists at the national, state, and community level. This network could greatly benefit from involvement by health care professionals. Ample opportunities exist for health care professionals to connect with others committed to the same goals. Many of these groups maintain themselves as

specialists in the field of traffic safety. Others, such as law enforcement, may be focused on broader goals in which traffic safety is an important part.

The benefits to health care professionals to get involved in traffic safety injury prevention are numerous. These, as well as the specifics of the role of these individuals are discussed in *Health Care Providers in a Safe Community*.

Health care providers can enhance their injury prevention role by collaborating with others at the community level who are already working in the area. The benefits of collaborating with traffic safety specialists and others involved in motor vehicle injury prevention include:

- ▶ Availability of additional resources;
- ▶ Additional sources of data for better problem identification;
- ▶ Multi-disciplinary expertise; and
- ▶ Linkage to additional partners.

At the Local Level

A good place to meet those partners involved in traffic safety is to join a traffic safety committee, community traffic safety team, or a Safe Communities effort. These initiatives may be locally-driven or county-based. All are multi-disciplinary groups that welcome health care providers. Members can include local jurisdiction officers in law enforcement, sheriff's officers, highway patrol officers, fire and rescue and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers; as well as representatives from the public health department, traffic engineering, school board, local chapters of safety organizations such as the American Red Cross or National Safety Council; advocacy groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD); or persons representing the diversity of the community including banks, local businesses, and volunteers. Do not wait for a formal invitation to join an effort. Ask if you can go and listen to a meeting or invite yourself. If an organized traffic safety initiative has not yet formed in any given area, get one started!

All members of a traffic safety committee are typically asked to be active (working) participants, however their degree of participation may fluctuate depending on the demands related to their primary jobs and other factors. Team members tend to be dynamic and attendance may vary, which is another reason why participation by those in health care is readily welcomed. Individuals involved in traffic enforcement particularly respect participation by individuals who come to traffic safety meetings when it isn't necessarily a key component of their jobs. They also appreciate the support and perspective of health care providers for enforcement issues. Child passenger safety issues, for example, are just one area within traffic safety committee efforts in which everyone involved can help in the effort to increase awareness and promote correct positioning and usage of safety seats. Being involved in committee functions is enjoyable and usually stress-free because they are team events with members having varying levels of expertise. Working together is mutually supportive.

At the local level there may also be professional organizations for health care

providers that may be interested in traffic safety initiatives. Participating in both a community and professional group can enhance communication, support, and resource persons for projects.

At the State Level

A key contact for anyone interested in traffic safety is the Governor's Highway Safety Representative in the State Highway Safety Office. State Highway Safety Offices exist in every state, territory, and the District of Columbia. Their mission is to promote and coordinate highway safety activity throughout the state.

Other state-level resources include the State Office of Emergency Medical Services, state police agencies, and state injury prevention program directors. Support from these agencies can include traffic safety data, newsletters and bulletins, brochures, grant funding, and other resources within your community. A list of contacts at the state level is included in a recent publication, *Who's Who in Traffic Safety: A Guide to Agencies and Organizations* (information on how to obtain this publication is included at the end of this document).

At the National Level

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) provides resource materials, technical assistance, training, and data, as well as an Internet site (<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>) that has an extensive library of downloadable files, including traffic safety statistics, consumer information related to technology such as child safety seats, seat belts, air bags, and helmets, and many other topics. NHTSA also has 10 regional offices, each with an injury control contact and other resources.

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, provides information and research support for health and injury prevention efforts at the national, regional, state, and local levels through a close-working relationship with health departments.

There are also national traffic safety organizations that have state and local chapters. Examples include the American Automobile Association (AAA), Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS), National Safety Council, and Students Against Driving Drunk (SADD).

Working with Highway Safety Partners

A powerful message to a community can emerge when health care professionals team up with highway safety partners to reinforce a common mission of decreasing injuries and fatalities. In addition, the combined effect of health care professionals working with traffic safety professionals is greater than if either works independently.

Those who work within the health care environment need to recognize that their organizational culture may be very different from that of their local police or fire department. The chain of command may be more or less rigid, impacting on the formality and timeliness of a request for support of personnel or resources for an

initiative. It is helpful to have a contact person from an organization who can assist with wording or formatting a request and who can expedite support. It is also helpful to gain an understanding of the limitations of an agency, for example, the pre-determined catchment area, to help you focus your request.

Highway safety professionals may use abbreviations and vocabulary that are unfamiliar to health care providers, and vice versa. Just as there is hospital “lingo,” there also exists a unique traffic safety vocabulary. However, a common language can be easily found.

Health care professionals have a unique advantage when becoming involved in injury prevention initiatives. A variety of scheduling options exist over a 24-hour period, making it easier to “fit in” meetings or participate in initiatives.

Despite differences between organizations, common ground between health care providers and traffic safety specialist exists — to prevent the occurrence of motor vehicle injuries. Health care professionals, who are on the receiving end of injuries and fatalities, can provide a unique and realistic viewpoint to a team effort. Health care providers can translate complex information into clear patient and public education messages, delivered in a caring way. Every community has health care providers who can become involved as partners in traffic safety.

A listing of the primary federal agencies, state and local government associations, traffic safety organizations, medical and health associations, and other partners is provided in a publication from the Education Development Center entitled *Who's Who in Traffic Safety: A Guide to Agencies and Organizations*, available through the Education Development Center, Inc., 55 Chapel Street, Newton, MA 02158-1060, phone: (617) 969-7100.

About the Author

Mary Russell has a dual background in physical therapy and nursing. Currently she is the Project Coordinator for Safe Communities in Palm Beach County, Florida. She is actively involved at the community level in coalition efforts as well as a participant/leader for SAFE KIDS, EN C.A.R.E., MADD, American Red Cross, and traffic safety committees. She contributes to projects at the local level, as well as county, state, and national efforts. She is currently completing her Doctorate in Education at Florida International University, and teaches in multi-disciplinary fields.

